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ABSTRACT

Distance education occurs when distance and/or time prevents the learner and instructor from meeting face to face. Ways of providing distance learning opportunities include traditional materials by mail (print materials, audio and video support materials, audio and video lectures) and electronic materials (faxed information, telephone, electronic mail, audioconference, videoconference, interactive chat, instructional television, satellite transmission of instruction, web-based learning). Distance education is an alternative to conventional education for learners who do not have access to facilities that provide standard courses, dislike a school environment, or have restricted hours that prevent onsite participation. Distance education is not for everyone. It often involves more learner dedication and initiative than traditional courses, since students may feel isolated. Timely instructor feedback is essential. Other considerations for using distance education are as follows: good design, learner's needs, lack of normal cues provided in a regular classroom setting, and provision of time for instructors and students to become accustomed to their use. Few distance education options are available to family literacy providers. Two ways to begin to explore the area are using distance learning for ongoing professional development, parent education, and parent/child involvement. (Contains 21 resources, including print sources, websites, and listservs.) (YLB)

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TECHNOLOGY UPDATE

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Distance Education: When Distance is an Issue

By Margarete Epstein

[This article was originally written for *The Family Literacy Resource Notebook*. Much of the information pertains to adult literacy practitioners and students as well.]

What Is It?

Distance education occurs when distance and/or time prevents the learner and instructor from meeting together face to face. Distance learning is often characterized as independent study, though new technologies can provide considerable real time interaction and support. This support is desirable for many learners; without it some people may fail to learn.

Distance education has existed for a long time. Known as correspondence coursework, instructional materials are sent to the learner via mail. Time lags occur when using conventional mail systems, but many people still rely on these avenues because they do not have the ability to take advantage of new technology. Distance education alternatives have steadily grown as the result of communication technology that has advanced rapidly over the past several decades. Distance education is not for everyone, but certain aspects of distance education can be useful for many.

Some materials and venues for providing distance learning opportunities are as follows:

Traditional Materials by Mail

- Print materials
- Audio and video support materials
- Audio and video lectures

Electronic Materials
(computer-based and noncomputer-based)

- Faxed information
- Telephone
- E-mail
- Audio-conference
- Video-conference (desktop video and systems such as V-TEL)
- Interactive chat (on a desktop computer)
- Instructional Television (ITV)
- Satellite transmission of instruction
- Web-based learning

Why Use Distance Education?

Distance education is an alternative to conventional education. Often learners who choose distance learning do not have access to facilities that provide standard courses. Some dislike a school environment. Others have restricted hours that prevent on-site participation. Distance education allows them to continue their education without these constraints.

Distance education is not for everyone however. It often involves more learner dedication and initiative than traditional courses. Because many students feel isolated, continued participation is compromised. Timely instructor feedback is an often cited as one of the most important aspects of a successful course.

There are several other considerations for using distance education instructional alternatives whether you are a provider or a producer of them. As with all good instruction, distance instruction needs to be well designed. Distance instruction needs to take the learner's needs into consideration. This can be especially difficult if the instruction is being provided to a widely varied audience. Designers of distance instruction need to be sensitive to the lack of normal cues provided in a regular classroom setting. These include visual and auditory signals continuously provided by

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learners such as, head nods, eye contact, and verbal asides that can indicate lack of student understanding. Finally, modern distance education often involves the use of technical systems such as computers and V-Tel systems. It is important that both instructors and students are given time to become accustomed to their use. In a perfect world, they would be fairly proficient at them before instruction begins, but learning the system can be a real education all its own (Cyrs, 1997).

What Distance Education Options Are Available to Family Literacy Providers?

Although distance education alternatives are becoming more prevalent, there is little in the way of distance education available specifically for family literacy. Two ways to begin to explore the area are using distance learning for ongoing professional development and for parent education and parent/child involvement.

Though there are some Adult Education courses and programs available for those seeking credited instruction,[1] these will not necessarily be tailored to the family literacy provider. If you discuss your family literacy emphasis, many instructors would be willing to assist you in tailoring the course to it. This would mean e-mailing or calling the instructor of the course, explaining your family literacy emphasis, and determining if the goals of the course can accommodate your focus. You can also do informal continuous professional development through organizations and Listservs dedicated to the topic of family literacy.

Distance components can be incorporated into your family literacy program for students as well. Some ideas are:

- Provide sets of books for loan to students whose time or distance constraints limit the amount of time they can devote to on-site interaction.[2]
- Use the Internet for parent/child interaction time.
- Parents and children may explore many sites designed for children.
- Connect with other family literacy programs to do family keypals. Keypals are the e-mail equivalent to penpals. Both children and adults often enjoy corresponding with peers via e-mail.
- Get parents on-line to examine parenting issues located at many parenting web sites. At many sites a chat function allows parents to talk directly with other parents who have similar concerns about their children.

Though distance learning avenues may seem "unnecessary," it is important to realize that the push for lifelong learning and continuous learning is very strong because of the increasing amount and rate of change of information in our society today. It is likely that your students and certain that their children will be confronted with one or more of these types of instructional distance delivery. It would be advantageous for family members to become more accustomed to using these modes of learning together and enjoy exploring a variety of distance learning avenues.

Some Distance Education Jargon

Bulletin Boards (BBs): These may also be called discussion groups. They are on-line message centers usually with discussions devoted to a topic. You can read the various "threaded" messages (i.e., messages that are in direct response to another message will be in a subcategory to the original message) and respond to the message or send a new one of your own.

Chat: Interactive chat is the ability to communicate over the Internet in real time with other people.

Cyberspace: The "place" in which interaction, exploration, etc. occurs when on-line (e.g., one "chats" in cyberspace). A term originally created by William Gibson in his book Neuromancer.

E-mail: E-mail is the electronic transmission of mail through the Internet. Its advantages are that it transmits nearly immediately. The disadvantage is that you need access to a personal computer and an E-mail account.

[1]One exception is the University of Indiana, which offers an on-line course in family literacy. Go to http://education.indiana.edu/~disted/ for more information.

[2]Whether a student's distance involvement in your program can be counted toward hours of attendance would have to be verified by the policy makers of your program. Because the use of distance alternatives is very new in many educational institutions, practices and policy may very well not be in alignment.

FAQ: Frequently Asked Questions. This is a common addition to many web sites that allow the newcomer to quickly find out information about the topic, site, and customary way of interacting. It is advisable to look for and read the FAQ information before asking a lot of questions of others on the Listserv, bulletin board, etc.

Internet: The internet is a broad interconnection of computers and servers (computers specifically used to provide Internet services to other computers). The World Wide Web is commonly used interchangeably with the Internet. It is however actually a subset of the Internet. The Internet provides other functions such as FTP (file transfer protocol), E-mail, gopher, etc.

Listservs: There are electronically distributed messages that are specific to a certain topic or organization. You subscribe to a Listserv via E-mail. Your subscription is OK'd by the Listserv. You receive messages from other people subscribed to the list and are able to send your own messages to the list.

Real-time (RT): This term is commonly used for chat or other synchronous interaction.

Satellite: Satellites receive and send signals from one point to another. They provide high quality data and allow for many users of the programming. "Satellite technology has been a major influence on educational telecommunications and instructional programming, and will likely to be the next major technological step for education, as costs continue to decrease." (http://www.ihets.org/distance_ed/ipse/fdhandbook/glossary.html)

Snail Mail: This term refers to regular postal service, which in comparison to E-mail is considerably slower.

Synchronous/Asynchronous: Synchronous refers to communication that occurs at the same time. Asynchronous is when communication is occurring at different times. (e.g., E-mail is typically asynchronous and having a conversation with someone on the phone is synchronous.)

Teleconferencing: (audioconferencing, videoconferencing): The use of tele- (distance) technologies to bring together two or more people for discussion about a topic. These can be enhanced with technology that allows for simultaneous work on papers or other computer-based applications.

URL: A URL is a Uniform Resource Locator, also known as the web address of a site. It is the information that you put in the location or address box of your browser. (e.g., to get to the White House web site, use this URL http://www. whitehouse.gov)

Web-based learning: This is learning conducted with the use of the World Wide Web, an interconnection of servers and personal computers throughout the world. It uses a variety of text-based and multimedia resources such as video, audio, and pictures to display information about a topic.

Some Resources for Further Information

Print-Based

Cyrs, T.E. (Ed.). (1997). Teaching and learning at a distance: What it takes to effectively design, deliver, and evaluate programs. New Directions for Teaching and Learning, 71. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Willis, B. (Ed.) (1994). Distance education: Strategies and tools. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Educational Technology Publications.

Web-Based[3]
More Information on Distance Learning

Distance Learning Resource Network

- http://www.wested.org/tie/dlrn/

The Online Chronicle of Distance Education and Communication

- http://www.fcae.nova.edu/disted/index.html

The United States Distance Learning Association

- http://www.usdla.org/

[3]All websites were valid as of Tuesday, March 23, 1999. Web sites change and may even disappear. Please take the time to use a search engine to find the site listed or comparable information if it is no longer available.

Distance Learning On the Net

- http://www.hoyle.com/distance.htm

PBS LiteracyLink: A site specific to the needs of adult literacy educators and learners.

- http://www.pbs.org/learn/literacy/

Overview of Classroom Teleconferencing Technologies: Helpful if you are confused about the various forms of teleconferencing available and want to understand the differences in quality and cost.

- http://www.zianet.com/getterw/teleconference. html

Distance Education Clearinghouse: A comprehensive informative site about everything related to distance education.

- http://www.uwex.edu/disted/home.html

A white paper that covers the topic of distance learning/distance education

- http://dmi.oit.itd.umich.edu/reports/DistanceLearn/sect1.html

Distance Education at a Glance: A Series of Guides Prepared by Engineering Outreach at the University of Idaho

- http://www.uidaho.edu/evo/distglan. html

Family Literacy Specific Sites

The National Center for Family Literacy: "A non-profit organization supporting family literacy services for families across the United States through programming, training, research, advocacy, and dissemination."

- http://www.famlit.org/

Ohio Literacy Resource Center: Family Literacy Special Collections

- http://literacy.kent.edu/Midwest/FamilyLit/index.html

Also includes the Family Literacy Resource Notebook

- http://literacy.kent.edu/Oasis/famlitnotebook/

Subscribe to Listservs and discussion groups devoted to family literacy issues or distance learning topics

Ohio Literacy Resource Center discussion group

- http://mercury.educ.kent.edu/forums/Index.cfm?CFApp=2

Literacy NIFL-FAMILY Forum: to subscribe to this List-serv use the on-line form available at the following URL. Archived

- http://www.nifl.gov/nifl-family/

DISTED: Chronicle of Distance Education and Communication

- listproc@pulsar.acast.nova.edu

DEOS-L: International Discussion Forum for Distance Learning. To join this Listserv, use the E-mail address *listserv@lists.psu.edu* and type in the body of the message *join DEOS-L YOURNAME.*

Just a few of the fun educational web-sites and directories for parents and their children

Ranger Rick's Activity Of The Month This Month

- http://www.nwf.org/nwf/rrick/rractive.html

Yahooligans: a web directory devoted to kid web sites

- www.yahooligans.com

Kid's Guide to Cyberspace--From The American Library Association

- http://www.ala.org/parentspage/greatsites/

National Geographic

- http://www.nationalgeographic.com/

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